



## Early Journal Content on JSTOR, Free to Anyone in the World

This article is one of nearly 500,000 scholarly works digitized and made freely available to everyone in the world by JSTOR.

Known as the Early Journal Content, this set of works include research articles, news, letters, and other writings published in more than 200 of the oldest leading academic journals. The works date from the mid-seventeenth to the early twentieth centuries.

We encourage people to read and share the Early Journal Content openly and to tell others that this resource exists. People may post this content online or redistribute in any way for non-commercial purposes.

Read more about Early Journal Content at <http://about.jstor.org/participate-jstor/individuals/early-journal-content>.

JSTOR is a digital library of academic journals, books, and primary source objects. JSTOR helps people discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content through a powerful research and teaching platform, and preserves this content for future generations. JSTOR is part of ITHAKA, a not-for-profit organization that also includes Ithaka S+R and Portico. For more information about JSTOR, please contact [support@jstor.org](mailto:support@jstor.org).

## THE TRANSFORMATIONS OF A LEGEND

The mighty remains of republican and imperial Rome served as quarries to the generations that succeeded her fall and inherited her dilapidated estate. Theatres, temples, and basilicas furnished materials to build the palaces of popes and cardinals. Palaces of popes and cardinals in the process of centuries crumbled into ruins, and these ruins were degraded to vulgar and villatic uses; so that now one may see the carved *fascēs* and eagles shining between piles of hay, or the august symbol that confirmed the will of the Senate and Roman people backing a horse-trough, or goats rubbing their horns against characters commemorating one who in his day was Emperor, Augustus, Pater Patriæ, and Pontifex Maximus.

In much the same way the ancient legends and myths of Greece and Rome have been the quarries out of which succeeding generations have built the palaces, or the cots, or the styes, in which their thoughts were housed; and they worked in the ancient materials to suit modern uses, sometimes in singular fashion.

The story of Orpheus and Eurydice was preserved throughout the Middle Ages by means of Vergil, whose fame suffered no eclipse, even in the darkest times. In brief, it is this: Orpheus, a Thracian, the son of Apollo and the Muse Calliope, was the most accomplished musician of his time. His wife, the nymph Eurydice, while fleeing from the violence of Aristæus, a shepherd, was bitten by a serpent and died of the wound. Orpheus, unable to bear her loss, descended to the regions of the dead, where the charm of his music so moved Pluto and Persephone that Eurydice was allowed to return with her husband to the upper world, on condition, however, that he should not look back until he had reached the light of day. At the confines of light and darkness he looked back, and Eurydice was lost to him forever.

The first manipulator of this legend at whose mode of handling I shall look, is Boëthius. We have by no means as full an account of this interesting man as one could wish; but it seems

that he lived at the close of the fifth and beginning of the sixth century, that he had high rank and great wealth, but incurring the displeasure of Theodoric, King of the Ostrogoths, suffered a long imprisonment, and was at last put to death. During his incarceration he wrote his five books of the *Consolation of Philosophy*, a work which enjoyed, and deserved, a thousand years of popularity. The work is in the form of Socratic dialogue, and by way of refreshment to his reader, Boëthius frequently drops into poetry. This poetry though graceful, and never losing that note of distinction which characterizes all his work, does not always strike me as being especially germane to the matter in hand; and perhaps his shade will pardon me the surmise that some of these pieces were poetical exercises which he had, so to speak, in stock. But this is little to the purpose.

To the end of the third book, in which he has discussed the *summum bonum*, Boëthius appends a versified narrative of the story of Orpheus, and to that story tacks a Platonic moral. His glyconics, turned into English prose, run somewhat thus:—

Happy he who can visit the clear fountain of the good: happy he who can cast off the bonds of heavy earth. Of yore the Thracian bard, lamenting the death of his spouse, when with his plaintive melodies he had caused the groves to move, and the flowing stream to pause; when the hind, fearless, mingled with the fierce lions, nor did the hare fear the hound, now made gentle by the song — while still a cruel grief tortured his inmost breast, nor did the harmonies which subdued all things bring any assuagement to the lord of the lay — complaining of the cruelty of the gods, he sought the abodes of the dead.

There, tempering in soft melodies to the resounding chords all that he had learned from his divine mother, all that unavailing grief could inspire, and love lamenting its loss, with a moving supplication he appeals to the lords of the shades.

The triple guardian of the gate is quelled, overcome by the novel sounds; the goddesses, punishers of crime, who terrify guilty souls, find their cheeks wet with tears of pity. No longer does the precipitate wheel whirl Ixion, and Tantalus, tortured with long thirst, disregards the running stream. The vulture, repastured with harmony, ceases to rend the liver of Tityus. At last the Lord of the shades, moved with pity, cries: "We are conquered. Let us restore to the man his wife, redeemed with song. But a condition controls this gift: he may not turn back his eyes until he has left Tartarus."

But who can give a law to lovers? Love is to itself a higher

law. Alas! just on the confines of night and day, Orpheus looked back at his Eurydice, lost her, and was undone.

This fable has a lesson for all you who strive to lead your souls to the upper day. For whoever, overcome, shall turn back his eyes to the Tartarean cave, whatever special good he may be bringing with him, he loses it when he glances toward the regions below.<sup>1</sup>

We now make a leap of four centuries to the time of Alfred, King of the West Saxons and King of the English. This monarch of blessed memory, when he had well beaten the Danes and won, as he says, a little "stillness" for himself and his people, set about rekindling the extinguished lamp of learning. He himself translated into the common speech four books, the best that he knew: a book of universal history, a book of church history, a book of religion, and a book of philosophy. This last was the *Consolation*, which he did not merely translate, but also expounded. (How much of the work was from the King's own pen, and how much from that of Asser or another, we cannot tell — the world accepts it as Alfred's.)

Here now is Alfred's version of the Orpheus story, told in English for Englishmen of the ninth century:—

It came to pass in ancient times that there was a harper in the land that was called Thracia, and it was in the country of the Greeks. This harper was most unbelievably good, and his name was Orpheus. He had a very excellent wife, and she was called Eurydice. Forsooth men said of the harper that he could harp so that the wood moved and the rocks they stirred for the music, and wild beasts would run up and stand as still as if they were tame, so that though men or hounds went against them, they shunned them not. Then it is said that the harper's wife died, and her soul was led to hell. Then waxed the harper so woful that he might not bear to be among other men, but betook himself to the woods and sat in the mountains by day and by night; wept and harped that the woods trembled and the rivers stood still, and no hart feared the lion, and no hare the hound, nor did any beast have any wrath or fear toward others for the delight of the sound. But the harper, finding that he had no joy of anything in this world, then bethought him that he would seek the gods of hell, and charm them with his harp, and pray them to give him back his wife. When he arrived there, there came to meet him the dog of hell, whose name was

---

<sup>1</sup> Boëthius, *C. P.* III, *Met.* xii.

Cerberus, who had three heads, and he began to fawn with his tail and play with him for his harpings. There was, moreover, a very terrible gate-ward, whose name was Charon, who also had three heads and was very ancient. Then began the harper to pray him that he would protect him while he was there, and bring him thence again safe and whole. Then promised he him that, for he was charmed with the wondrous sound. So fared he farther until he met the grim goddesses that the people of that land call *Parcæ*, of whom they say that they show favour to no man, but deal with every man according to his deeds; and they say, moreover, that they rule each man's destiny. Then began he to pray their mercy, and they began to weep with him. Then went he further, and all hell-dwellers ran to meet him and led him to their King, and all began to speak with him and to beg what he begged. And the restless wheel that *Ixion*, the King of the *Lapithæ*, was bound to for his guilt, stood still for the harpings; and *Tantalus*, a king that in this world was beyond measure covetous, and the same evil of craving had followed him there, he now had rest. Even the vulture forbore to tear the liver of the King *Tityus*, whom he had before tormented in that wise; and the torments of all the hell-dwellers ceased the while the harper harped before the King. And when he had harped a long, long while, then spake the King of hell's people and said: "Give we the youth his wife, for he hath earned her with his harping." But he charged him to take good heed that he looked not back while he was on the way thence, saying that if he looked back he should lose his wife. But love can hardly or not at all be restrained. Well-a-way! Behold, *Orpheus* led his wife with him until he came to the bounds of light and darkness, and his wife followed ever after him. As he came forth to the light, then looked he back toward his wife, and she was straightway lost to him.

These lying stories teach every man that desires to flee the darkness of hell, and to come to the light of the true God, that he look not back to his old sins to the end that he again commit them as he did before; for whosoever turns again with full will his mood to the sins that he before gave up, and commits them again, and they delight him again, and he thinks never to leave them, then shall he lose his former good, unless he repent and amend.

Here we see the simple Christian interpretation. To *Boëthius*, *Orpheus* is the man who has lost the sublime contemplations and serene life of high philosophy, by looking back to the things of earth; to *Alfred* he is an ordinary backsliding sinner.

I make now another leap of six centuries, and come to that graceful poet and fabulist, the Scot, *Robert Henryson*, who has

tried his hand on this story of Orpheus, and wrought it into a moral poem of which this is an outline:—

Orpheus is the son of Phœbus and the Muse Calliope, and his wife Eurydice is a mighty queen of Thrace. The story then proceeds as in Vergil. Eurydice fleeing from Aristæus, is bitten by a serpent, and straightway seized by Proserpine (here, as often in mediæval literature, identified with the Queen of Faery) and borne to the abodes of the dead. Orpheus, distracted with grief, goes to the forest and sings a lament in the beautiful measure of Chaucer's *Queen Anelida*. This ended, he hangs his harp about his neck, and sets forth to seek his wife.

First he ascends to heaven by the way of Watlyng Street (the Milky Way) and then comes down successively through the spheres of Saturn, of his grandfather Jupiter, of Mars, of his father Phœbus, of Venus, of Mercury, of the Moon, searching all in vain, and then to earth again. But this long journey was not wholly profitless, as by the way he picked up some valuable musical points from the harmony of the spheres. He learned the Guidonian hexachord, out of which six notes are compounded 'five heavenly symphonies' or chords, viz., the *diatessaron*, or fourth; *diapason*, or octave, 'simple and duplicate;' *diapente*, or fifth, and 'diapente composit with a dys,' or inverted fifth.<sup>2</sup> The poet hastens to forestall our criticism by confessing that he knows nothing of music, and that it is very foolish of him to write about it:—

"For in my lyf I coud nevyr syng a note."

The descent of Orpheus to Tartarus, and his adventures there present little novelty. The three sisters, Alecto, Megæra, and Tisiphone are employed in watching a bridge, and in turning Ixion's wheel. At the sound of the harp the sisters fall asleep, Orpheus crosses the bridge, and Ixion escapes from his wheel. The water that fled from Tantalus stops to listen to the music and the poor soul enjoys a refreshing drink.

The various misdoers tormented for their crimes (Cæsar,

---

<sup>2</sup> 'Dys' here stands for *dyas*, the name anciently given to two-part harmony. In the *dyas simplex* the chords were direct, and in the *dyas composita*, inverted.

Nero, and Pilate among them, beside many popes and cardinals in full pontificals) afford our poet the usual opportunities. To move the King and Queen of the shades, Orpheus puts forth his highest art, playing a bass in the Hypodorian mode (corresponding to modern A minor) with a descant or upper part in the Hypolydian (modern C major) until 'thay wepit sore,' and restored him his wife under the condition and with the calamitous result previously mentioned.

But the moral of the poem is the thing. It is taken, he tells us, from the learned Nicholas Trivetus, a monk of the thirteenth century, whose commentaries on Boëthius are still extant in manuscript. Now when a monk begins to expound, we know what to expect. It has been said that a simile need not run on four legs; but a monkish exegist was never content unless his parable or apologue ran on as many legs as a centipede. When Ælfric expounds the miracle of the loaves and fishes, he is not satisfied with saying that it typified the spiritual feeding of the soul with divine truth. Every detail must have its mystic meaning. The five barley loaves, hard and dry, were the five books of Moses; the two fishes, more savoury than the barley loaves, but less substantial, were the poetical Scriptures and the prophets. The grass on which the people sat typifies worldly pleasures and desires, which one must place beneath him if he would be spiritually fed. The lad who brought the food but did not eat thereof, was the Jewish people, who handed down the Scriptures without partaking of their spiritual benefits—and so on, with extraordinary ingenuity.

And so Trivetus. Orpheus, we are told, is man's higher reason; Eurydice his affection or desire, sometimes turned to high, and sometimes to earthly things. Aristæus, the violent shepherd, we are surprised to learn, is virtue, which desires to possess man's affection. Eurydice fleeing from the pursuit of virtue is bitten by the serpent of sin, and sinks to the lower regions. Reason, then, having no joy in life when affection or desire has left him, first seeks Eurydice in heaven, but finds her not, for, as the poet explains—

Seldom *there* our appetite is found,  
It is so fast unto the body bound.

Reason, therefore, comes down from heaven to earth, and then proceeds to the regions below to bring back Eurydice.

The three-headed Cerberus betokens death, and his three heads are death in youth, death in middle age, and death in old age. Of the three Furies, Alecto is wicked thoughts, Megæra wicked words, and Tisiphone wicked deeds.

The higher reason would fain bring the affection up from the depth to which it has sunk, and almost succeeds, but looking back, that is, faltering in its purpose through weakness, the affection relapses to the lower regions.

Scholasticism, mysticism, and asceticism closed the door and turned the key on the human intellect for five hundred years. Thinkers looked within and refused to look without. Like the enchanted Merlin, the human mind lay

Closed in the four walls of a hollow tower,  
From which was no escape for evermore.

With the Renaissance came liberation and a passionate re-action. The world and its delights were no longer delusions and snares to catch men's souls, but the glorious gifts of God. The ideal man was no longer Simeon Stylites or St. Antony the Hermit, but Arthur, Charlemagne, Roland, or Gawayn. The romances of chivalry arose — projections of noble, if impossible, ideals upon the background of an equally impossible past. Dreams all, yet dreams that thrilled men's souls. Even the Church could not resist the impulse, and added the sequence of the Grail to the Arthur-cycle.

Again, classical antiquity was ransacked for fragments of Greek sculpture to work into this new fantastic architecture of Gothic spires and Saracenic minarets. Troy-books were written. Troilus was taken from the dust-bin of Dares Phrygius, made a lover of romance and accommodated with a Cresseid. The story of Thebes and the exploits of Alexander were re-worked in the new spirit.

Among the rest, Orpheus did not escape. Being, like Bottom, 'a very paramour for a sweet voice,' like Bottom he is marvellously translated. In the fourteenth century a poem was written by an unknown English poet, entitled *Orfeo and*



*Heurodis.* It professes to be a version of an ancient Breton lay; but as it was the fashion to attribute romantic stories to 'ancient British books,' we need attach no importance to that ascription, especially as the germ of the story was at hand in Vergil and Boëthius.

Orpheus, in this transformation, is a mighty king descended from Pluto and Juno, and the best harper of his time. He, with his queen Heurodis, dwelt in the city of Traciens, "for so," says the poet, "Winchester was called in those days." One bright day in May the queen went with her maidens to disport herself in her orchard, and lay down to sleep under a tree. After an unusually long slumber, she suddenly awoke in great agitation, shrieked, tore her hair and rent her cheeks. Her damsels in affright rush to the palace, crying that the queen has gone mad, and knights and ladies hasten to bear her to her chamber. The king, in great amazement and distress, prevails on her to tell the cause of this distracted behaviour, and she tells him that as she lay under the tree two fair knights came to her and summoned her to appear before their king, and upon her refusing, the king himself came in gorgeous array, placed her on a palfrey and conveyed her to his palace. After showing her all the splendours of the place, he carried her back to the orchard, but charged her to be at that place the next day ready to go with him to his kingdom, there to dwell evermore, under penalty of being torn to pieces if she refused.

Orpheus knows not what to do, but on the next day takes the queen to the orchard, surrounding her with a guard of a thousand knights, all sworn to give their lives for hers; yet despite their vigilance she suddenly vanishes.

Orpheus then calls a council of his barons, to whom he declares his purpose of abandoning his throne and going into the wilderness to bewail his loss. He appoints his steward to rule the kingdom in his absence, and commands his barons, whenever they shall have news of his death, to call a parliament and choose a new king. Clothing himself in the 'sclavin,' or pilgrim's gown, barefoot, and carrying his harp, he sets out on his wanderings.

His hard life in the forest is described. During his ten years

of endurance his beard grows to the girdle-stead, and his face is blackened and changed. His only solace was his harp; and when he played, birds and beasts crowded round him to hear the melody. Often in pleasant afternoons he saw the King of Faery with his meiné hunting in the forest, with baying of hounds and blowing of horns, but what they hunted he could not see. Sometimes there rode by squadrons of armed knights, a thousand and more, with banners; or companies of knights and ladies appeared, dancing to the sound of trumps and tabors and all manner minstrelsy. Once there came a gay company of ladies hawking by a river side, and taking great numbers of mallards, herons, and cormorants. Orpheus went up to one of them, and behold it was his wife, Queen Heurodis, who wept to see him in such plight; but 'neither spake to other a word,' and her companions hurried her away.

Orpheus follows the company, passes more than three miles through a cavern in the rocks, and emerges in a wondrous land in which stands a noble castle with walls of crystal and buttresses of red gold, and a hundred lofty towers set so thick with jewels that, although night had come on, the blaze of the gems made the land bright as day. The ladies enter the castle, and Orpheus follows them, the porter letting him in when told that he is a minstrel.

Within the castle he sees many folk lying that were thought dead in the world.

Than he gan biholde about al  
 And seighe, ful liggeand within the wal,  
 Of folk that were thider y-brought,  
 And thought dede, and nere nought.  
 Sum stode withouten hade,  
 And sum non armes nade,  
 And sum thurch the bodi hadde wounde,  
 And sum lay wode y-bounde,  
 And sum astrangled as thai ete,  
 And sum were in water adreynt,  
 And sum with fire al for-schreynt. . . .  
 Eche was thus in this world y-nome,  
 With fairi thider y-come.

There also lay, sleeping under a tree, his queen, Heurodis.

After gazing at these marvels, he enters the royal hall, and sees the King and Queen of Faery seated on a throne in great magnificence. The King is astonished at his boldness in coming

there unsummoned, a thing that had never before happened since he began to reign; but Orpheus explains that he is a minstrel, and that it is the privilege of his craft to visit the houses of Kings and offer them the solace of music. He then sits down and plays before the King so ravishingly that both sovereigns are charmed, and bid him name his own reward. He asks for the gift of the lady that is sleeping under the tree. The King refuses, saying that it is a loathly thing to give a lovely lady to a wretched minstrel, so lean, rough, and black. Orpheus replies that it is a loathlier thing for a King to break his word: that he was bid to ask and has asked, and the King must keep his promise. Touched on the point of honour, the King says, "Take her by the hand and go."

Orpheus returns with Heurodis, without misadventure, to his own land, and in the guise of a poor minstrel takes up his lodging with a beggar of the suburbs. The next day, borrowing the beggar's clothes, and taking his harp with him, he goes into the town where he meets his former steward, and asks his charity for a poor wandering harper. The steward bids him come to the palace, where he says a harper is always welcome for the sake of his lost lord Orpheus.

Many minstrels are in the hall — trumpeters and taborers, harpers and crowders — but the stranger surpasses them all. But the steward recognizes the harp and asks him whence he had it. He says that he found it in a wilderness by the body of a man half devoured by wild beasts, at which the steward raises a loud lamentation and swoons for grief. Then Orpheus knew that the steward was faithful to his trust, and revealed himself, and the steward threw over the table and fell weeping at his lord's feet.

Great joy was in the hall. Orpheus is bathed and shaved and clad in royal attire, and after lived long in bliss with his Queen Heurodis.

It is apparent that this romance is a *breccia* composed of fragments of several sources. It is not my purpose to analyse it, but simply to show the transformations of an ancient legend under the plastic operation of successive streams of tendency. From a simple story, or possibly a nature-myth, it has become a Platonic apologue, an orthodox Christian parable, a web of monkish mysticism, and a fairy romance.

WM. HAND BROWNE.

Johns Hopkins University.